Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing an integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning


(2005/C 221/22)

On 9 September 2004 the Council decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 149(4) of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

The Section for Employment, Social Affairs and Citizenship, which was responsible for preparing the Committee’s work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 20 January 2005. The rapporteur was Mr Koryfdis.

At its 414th plenary session held on 9 and 10 February 2005 (meeting of 10 February), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 107 votes to 2 with no abstentions.

1. Introduction

1.1 After a lengthy process of research, preparations and consultations (1), the Commission has presented its proposal establishing an integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning.

1.2 The European Economic and Social Committee welcomes this development and points out that the purpose of the ideas set out in the present opinion is to make the Commission’s proposal more effective and practical.

1.3 The EESC’s view of the Commission’s proposal is therefore determined mainly by the knowledge and experience it provides in connection with:

the delay in achieving the Lisbon objectives;

the delay in matching education and training with productivity (2);

the demographic situation in Europe; and

the discussions which have recently developed at European and national level to find solutions to these problems (3).

2. The Commission proposal

2.1 The Commission’s proposal (COM(2004) 474 final) aims at a restructuring of existing education programmes. According to the proposal, this restructuring responds in particular to four factors:

— to changes across the EU whereby education and training systems are becoming increasingly integrated in a lifelong learning context (…);

— to the increasingly important role for education and training in creating a competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in Europe (…);

— to the need to reinforce the strengths of programmes and address the discontinuities and lack of synergy (…);

— to the need to simplify and rationalise Community legislative instruments by creating an integrated framework within which a wide variety of activities can be funded.

2.2 The proposal is based on the existing Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci and eLearning programmes, the Europass initiative, and the various actions funded through the Community action programme to promote bodies active at European level and to support specific activities in the fields of education and training.

(1) The main stages in this long process are listed in the Appendix.
(2) Of C 120 of 20.5.2005.
(3) It should be noted that considerable momentum has been built up in seeking solutions to the Union’s current key problems, such as the Lisbon objectives (employment, knowledge-based economy, sustainable development, etc.). Life-long learning, and the need to put it on an institutional footing, represent a common denominator in all the approaches to resolve such problems. This momentum includes the initiatives taken by the Dutch Presidency, in cooperation with the European Commission, on the links between training and productivity and on strengthening European cooperation on vocational training, together with the Kok Report on the mid-term review of the Lisbon strategy in March 2005 ( http://europa.eu.int/comm/lisbon_strategy/pdf/2004-1866-EN-complet.pdf).
2.3 The proposal is also based on the realisation that ‘significant advantages would accrue from integrating Community support for transnational cooperation and mobility in the fields of education and training into a single programme, which would permit greater synergies between the different fields of action, and offer more capacity to support developments in lifelong learning, and more coherent, streamlined and efficient modes of administration’ (1).

2.4 The proposal therefore concludes that ‘an Integrated Programme should (...) be established to contribute through lifelong learning to the development of the European Union as an advanced knowledge society, with sustainable economic development, more and better jobs and greater social cohesion’ (2).

2.5 It is pointed out that ‘given the specificities of the schools, higher education, vocational training and adult education sectors, and the consequent need for Community action to be based on objectives, forms of action and organisational structures tailored to them, it is appropriate to retain individual programmes within the framework of the Integrated Programme targeted at each of these four sectors, while maximising the coherence and commonality between them’ (3).

2.6 The ‘integrated programme’ contains the following categories of programme:

— The sectoral programmes:

— the Comenius programme, which is to address the teaching and learning needs of all those in pre-school and school education (…)

— the Erasmus programme, which is to address the teaching and learning needs of all those in formal higher education and vocational education and training at tertiary level (…)

— the Leonardo da Vinci programme, which is to address the teaching and learning needs of all those in vocational education and training (…)

— the Grundtvig programme, which is to address the teaching and learning needs of those in all forms of adult education (…);

— The ‘transversal programme’ is to comprise the following four key activities:

— policy cooperation in lifelong learning within the Community

— promotion of language learning

— development of innovative ICT-based content, services, pedagogies and practice for lifelong learning

— dissemination and exploitation of results of actions supported under the programme and previous related programmes, and exchange of good practice;

— The Jean Monnet programme is to support institutions and activities in the field of European integration. It will comprise the following three key activities:

— the Jean Monnet action

— operating grants to support specified institutions dealing with issues relating to European integration

— operating grants to other European institutions and associations in the fields of education and training.

2.7 An important element in the Commission’s proposal is the revision of the quantified targets, in the light of the changes to the amounts that were proposed in the detailed financial perspective 2007 to 2013. These targets are:

— 1 in 20 school pupils involved in Comenius activities 2007 — 2013

— 3 million Erasmus students by 2011

— 150,000 Leonardo placements by 2013

— 25,000 Grundtvig mobilities by 2013.

2.7.1 The Commission views such ambitious targets as essential to make the new programme an adequate instrument to support the achievement of the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy by 2010.

2.7.2 The indicative financial amount proposed is set at € 13.620 billion for the seven years of the programme.

3. General comments

3.1 Addressing the Commission proposal constructively will certainly be a complex process. It will demand general and expert knowledge of the objectives, measures and difficulties encountered in the development of European education policy. It will also depend on the possibility of tying educational choices tightly in with the Union’s major objectives for the 21st century and more specifically with the major objectives of the current decade. Lastly, this will require a far-sighted approach, to ensure that the choices taken now for the future are the right ones.

3.2 The EESC has a clear position regarding the relative importance of the Union’s current central objectives, and has formulated an approach regarding how to tie lifelong learning into these objectives. Its ideas were set out in its recent exploratory opinion on ‘training and productivity’, requested by the Dutch presidency. Thus the EESC’s approach to the Commission proposal is based to a large extent on the above-mentioned ideas and positions.

3.3 The EESC’s approach is also determined by its experience of the results of the Union’s policies and programmes to date in the fields of culture and education, vocational training, youth and sport.

3.3.1 The overall picture is generally positive, with a few reservations. The Committee regards the programmes as:

— high-quality and effective channels of communication between Union bodies, and more specifically the Commission, and the European public;

— a basis for developing within the Union effective mobility of people and mobility of ideas and best practice;

— a basis for action that promises a high level of European value added, both now and in the future.

3.3.1.1 It is worth pointing out that the Union’s educational programmes to date are among the very few Community actions addressed directly to its citizens. The new programme should therefore aim to promote democracy based on participation and active citizenship, and to promote employment and a versatile labour market. The new programme should also contribute towards personal and occupational fulfilment for Europe’s citizens, through the creation of opportunities to broaden and make use of their potential. It is important, from the point of view of the Union and its links with its citizens, for a comprehensive programme to be built up targeting different age groups, individual citizens, the workplace, SMEs and the social partners.

3.4 In the Committee’s view, the Commission’s plan to establish an ‘integrated action programme in the field of lifelong learning’ marks a positive step. Consequently, the EESC’s proposals on the matter are designed exclusively to improve the programme.

3.4.1 In this context, the EESC would first note a shortcoming in the definition of lifelong learning.

3.4.1.1 Specifically, the EESC believes that there should be a single approach to education, training and youth policies, because it sees lifelong learning as a single process from nursery school to retirement and beyond. Furthermore, the EESC believes that there is a need to move beyond the age-related educational restrictions imposed on the European public by the European education and training systems. It therefore expected more from the programme, particularly concerning the establishment of a framework for lifelong learning. In the EESC’s view, the main difficulty is the need to

(1) These include the objectives of creating a knowledge-based society, sustainable development and its three dimensions and the multifaceted system of global governance.

(2) These are the objectives set in Lisbon, relating to the knowledge-based economy and sustainable development (Gothenburg), and Barcelona, relating to the qualitative dimension of European education systems.


(4) See OJ C 157 of 25.5.1998, point 3.7.1, which states the following: ‘The ESC considers a key issue in the development of the European educational area, and in European education policy generally, to be the consolidation of relevant policies (education, training, youth) and integration of the relevant action programmes. Policies on education, training and youth must be incorporated within a single framework of action and integrated from inception and adoption right through to implementation. This view derives not so much from the fact that initiatives on education still exclude certain areas, but more from the need to adopt a centralised policy approach. It derives from the need at last for there to be a single strategy on education, training and youth, as well as integrated planning of measures.’

(5) See the definition of lifelong learning in Article 3, point 27 of the Commission proposal.
give the single, transversal concept of lifelong learning a practical and legal basis that goes beyond access to the sectoral programmes. The integrated programme should act as a specific instrument for the EU Member States to create the conditions for everyone without exception — regardless of age and social status — to have genuine and unconditional access to education and training programmes. It should also be possible to defend this principle as a fundamental right before the European Court of Justice.

3.4.1.2 The EESC is aware that the future of lifelong learning will fundamentally be decided at national, regional and local level. It also realises that there are obstacles at European level to the programme being integrated in substance and in practice. However, it calls for provisions in the sectoral programmes to remove the severe restrictions (on age and content of study) that existing education and training systems impose on each other and on those wishing to learn. It is also in favour of active cooperation in developing the integrated programme and cultural and youth programmes, as well as (with a view to the probable ratification of the European Constitution) sports programmes. This is important because the above-mentioned informal education provided for young people in particular relates fundamentally to acquisition of the basic skills needed to ensure their employability as citizens and active social integration.

3.4.2 There are also shortcomings regarding horizontal communication and links between the sectoral programmes.

3.4.2.1 The EESC believes that the problems relating to the process of achieving the major goals of the Union are complex. Consequently, their solution requires the removal of obstacles to enable all forms of mobility to develop between the educational subsystems, within individual countries and between countries. Removing barriers and limitations is also the precondition for making lifelong learning a conscious and productive reality.

3.4.2.2 The explanatory memorandum of the Commission’s proposal contains an important point, first set out in its Communication on the new generation of Community Education and Training Programmes after 2006 (1). It argues that ‘… education and training systems are becoming increasingly integrated in a lifelong learning context, in order to respond to the new challenges of the knowledge society and of demographic change (2). Unfortunately, this position does not materialise in the present proposal. The Commission’s proposal is basically geared to existing educational structures and promotes only minimal synergies between the different educational levels. The EESC believes that the new programme would be more adaptable and more innovative if access to the specific programmes covered priority target groups without excluding groups which might be interested on the basis of their educational qualifications or age.

3.4.2.3 For these reasons, the funding and scope of the transversal programme must be broadened. The aim should be to develop cooperation and measures to create the foundations of a genuine European area of lifelong learning bringing substantial European added value and contributing significantly to realisation of the Lisbon objectives and sustainable development. Obviously, the above cooperation and action will call for the involvement of all types of educational subsystems (3), the social partners and, more generally, organised civil society and public authorities, regional and local authorities in particular.

3.4.2.4 Given the above, a particular boost should be provided for the Grundtvig Programme, which is designed to meet all types of adult education needs.

3.4.3 There is a third, but important, shortcoming in the link between the integrated programme and the goals of the Lisbon strategy.

3.4.3.1 The EESC believes that we are already far behind in achieving the Lisbon objectives. It also believes that 2010 is approaching fast and that, consequently, whether or not the Lisbon objectives are reached will depend on those Europeans who are currently in work. Lastly, it believes that raising awareness of the Lisbon strategy and objectives will require persistent and comprehensive action vis-à-vis this sector of the European public, in collaboration with the social partners. This means giving priority to enhancing people’s understanding of the Lisbon strategy and to working with them to successfully adapt to the challenges of sustainable development and the knowledge-based economy, while also promoting lifelong learning as an overall approach at all levels.


(2) COM(2004) 474 final, point 1.3, first indent.

(3) The educational subsystems include primary, secondary and higher education; general education and vocational training/education; educational establishments (suppliers of education and/or training); and types of education (conventional and alternative).
3.4.3.2 To this end, the EESC would recommend strengthening the lifelong learning programmes addressed to citizens that are currently in the workforce, while also making an immediate link between these programmes and sustainable development and the achievement of a knowledge-based economy. In other words, this means developing individual small and large-scale lifelong learning programmes on the basis of the specific requirements for broader programmes on sustainable development and achieving the Lisbon objectives (1), that will meet the approval of the social partners, following consultation and agreement.

3.4.3.3 The EESC attaches particular importance to the possibility of SMEs having access to the programme. It has argued that ‘… SMEs (…) are obliged to seek the advice and support of the social and economic environment in which they operate, since it is difficult for them to carry out complete educational actions by themselves (2). The EESC therefore proposes a special approach for SMEs, simplifying the relevant procedures in order to make their participation in the programme both feasible and effective.

3.4.3.4 These recommendations of the EESC could be financed within the proposed budget for the programme, if the balance between mobility and development actions were adjusted in favour of the latter for the period up until 2010. The above recommendation could also be financed by ensuring greater consistency and complementarity with other relevant Community policies (cf. Article 14 of the proposal). In this context European employment and research policies, European Social Fund policies, as well as Structural Fund policies, must include a lifelong learning dimension. At the same time and up until 2010, the above policies must be as compatible as possible with the objectives of the lifelong learning programme.

3.5 A further shortcoming concerns the confusion surrounding the division of responsibilities between the European, national, regional and local levels, and between the public authorities and the social partners and, more broadly, organised civil society.

3.5.1 The EESC considers it vital for there to be a clear and efficient allocation of roles and responsibilities among all the factors and players contributing to the implementation of the integrated programme of lifelong learning. It is contradictory for a line to be drawn between active policy-makers on the one hand, and passive recipients on the other, in such an important joint effort geared to the future aim of a knowledge-based Europe.

3.5.2 The EESC calls for the social partners, together with regional and local authorities, to be involved in the entire range of processes and actions under the integrated programme of lifelong learning. All social and civil organisations could, at their own request, be awarded a European label for taking part in the integrated programme — provided they themselves launch complementary schemes. As label holders, they would be able to join a European popular education ‘coalition’, which could have one or more representatives on the programme committee. Active involvement of this kind would make the system socially acceptable and lend it dynamism and effectiveness.

3.5.3 This recommendation would make it possible to relate the lifelong learning programme to practical, everyday social needs, and with the needs of the market. Among other things it would maximise the chances of improving the balance between the needs of the market — especially the labour market — and social needs.

3.5.3.1 The EESC draws attention in particular to the fact that the Commission’s proposal makes no mention of the priorities set out by the social partners in March 2002 regarding the framework of actions for lifelong development of skills and qualifications.

3.6 Another important issue is that of mobility, the funds to be assigned to it, and how they are to be distributed between the sectoral programmes.

3.6.1 The EESC believes that mobility is a positive factor, provided it ties in with the qualitative elements of the programmes. The aim of tripling the mobility programmes must therefore include qualitative features. In view of the above, and in the present phase up to 2010, mobility of citizens currently at work contains such qualitative features and has a major contribution to make to achieving the Lisbon objectives.

3.6.2 The EESC therefore calls for a more balanced distribution of mobility funds to the benefit of these citizens.

(1) For additional information see CESE 1435/2004, point 9 (an example of best practice).
(2) OJ C 120 of 20.5.2005, point 8.1.1.3.
3.7 The EESC considers that the communication aspect is a significant issue in terms of European citizens' engagement with the integrated programme.

3.7.1 In this regard, the EESC would also point out that the term 'integrated programme' does nothing — including from the communication point of view — to present the programme in a positive way.

3.7.2 Consequently, it is proposed that the term 'integrated programme' be replaced with one which is both accessible and descriptive. The EESC believes that 'Athena' — the ancient Greek goddess of knowledge and wisdom — could be an appropriate title.

4. Specific comments

4.1 Following on from the general comments, the purpose of the specific comments is to set out in detail the reservations and disagreements of the EESC regarding certain articles of the Commission's proposal. This means that it should generally be understood that the EESC endorses the articles in question to the extent that it does not state otherwise.

4.2 Articles 1-8:

4.2.1 The EESC thinks that Articles 1 to 8 should be revised in accordance with its recommendation that the social partners — together with civil society and regional and local authorities — should be more actively involved in the planned processes and actions (point 3.5.2); and with its recommendation on the programme title (point 3.7.2).

4.2.2 As regards the specific programmes in particular, and still in the context of its general comments, the EESC recommends that institutional structures be created to strengthen joint — and perhaps long-term — actions, above all in spheres that cultivate the principle of lifelong learning and citizens' response to current challenges.

4.3 Articles 9-14

4.3.1 The EESC feels that Article 11, which refers to representation and participation of the social partners in the Committee, is poorly formulated.

4.3.1.1 Firstly, there is a fundamental problem in relation to the form of participation of the social partners in the Committee. Giving them the status of observers, even though they may state their opinions in practice, is not consistent with the principle of democratic participation espoused by the Union in its constitution which is in the process of ratification. In addition, the main issue here is to establish the basis for cultivating a sense of shared social responsibility in framing and developing European education policies. If the social partners participate fully in the Committee (i.e. with voting rights), there will be a basis for such a sense of shared responsibility and its role will be of critical importance in framing and developing effective education policies. Furthermore, in addition to the responsibility of public authorities for decisions of a general educational nature, a corresponding responsibility also falls to the social partners. This responsibility is for training throughout working life and is expressed, or should be expressed, officially, through the processes of collective bargaining.

4.3.1.2 This inadequate form of participation of the social partners also sets a precedent for similar decisions at national, regional and local level, which makes no sense given that in certain Member States at least the social partners already play a key role in framing these policies.

4.3.1.3 The EESC believes that a separate dialogue is needed on the composition of the Committee, on a basis which would make it functional and effective. However, in general terms the EESC thinks it necessary for the Committee to include, on the basis of an intelligent balance, representatives of all groups who influence or are influenced by lifelong learning and have the relevant general and specialised knowledge. In other words, the Committee must be composed not only on a national basis, but also on an economic social basis (social partners — civil society more generally) and a knowledge basis (academic community).

4.3.1.4 Finally, the EESC takes the view that it is a mistake to limit the participation of the social partners to questions relating solely to vocational training. The work of the Committee will need to be integrated in the process leading to achievement of a knowledge-based Europe. That means that this Committee can provide an example of good practice for planning and policy choices based on reliable knowledge — knowledge of the whole picture, but also specialised knowledge as part of the whole. It will therefore be important for all players represented in the Committee to take part in all its procedures, in a way which is both functional and committed, as regards the what, the how and the why of the policy choices.
4.3.1.5 The EESC calls for a more active approach concerning the specific learning needs of people with disabilities. To this end, it proposes that Article 12(b) be amended to read as follows:

‘making provision for learners with special needs, and actively taking into account the specific needs of people with disabilities, in particular by helping to promote their integration into mainstream education and training’.

4.4 Articles 15-46

4.4.1 The EESC, in the context of its general comments (point 3.4.2 above), proposes broadening the activities and increasing the funding of the transversal programme, with a corresponding reduction in the funds allocated to sectoral programmes.

4.4.1.1 The thinking behind the above proposal is straightforward. Strengthening the transversal programme, in accordance with its content, starts off procedures to modernise the European educational systems as a whole. This means essentially that investments made in the transversal programme will yield returns for the European educational systems, depending to a large extent on the form of specific added value in each case. It follows from the above that the investments to be made in the transversal programme will naturally be the most productive and most effective investments.

4.4.2 The EESC proposes that the improved transversal programme for lifelong learning be linked directly with the Lisbon objectives, sustainable development and the European citizens who will be economically active in the period up to 2010 (point 3.4.3.2 above).

4.4.2.1 In practice this means an integrated approach to our overall strategy for lifelong learning, on the basis of the problems which led us to that strategy, the aims we have set ourselves for overcoming those problems and the means available for achieving those aims. It also means:

— supporting research and pilot applications of the academic community, the social partners and organised civil society in general, and at the level of regional public authorities, with a view to achieving the Lisbon objectives;

— particular encouragement for cooperation among the aforementioned players, who are pursuing the same objective and objectives relating to sustainable development;

— alternative proposals by the Union, on the basis of relevant good practice, on how to link lifelong learning with the Lisbon objectives at local level.

4.5 The EESC believes the programme under discussion to be of supreme importance for the future of the Union. For that reason it also thinks it important for the implementation of the programme to be subject to adjustment and for it to be monitored at the highest level. In this context the EESC would like to see the creation of a high-level standing committee to monitor the implementation of the programme, under the open method of coordination. The main task of this committee, with the support of the European Commission, would be to report on progress in the programme’s implementation at any given moment and to inform the European Council about it at regular intervals, with a view to making any necessary adjustments.

Brussels, 10 February 2005.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Anne-Marie SIGMUND